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SUBJECT: MALTA: GEORGE ABELA SWORN IN AS PRESIDENT

¶1. (U) Laborite George Abela, appointed by Nationalist PM Gonzi and unanimously approved by Parliament, was sworn in as President on Saturday, April 4. He will serve a five year term in the largely ceremonial position, replacing President Eddie Fenech Adami.

¶2. (SBU) Prior to his appointment as President, Abela worked as a lawyer in private practice for 33 years, specializing in civil, commercial and industrial law, also serving as legal advisor to the General Workers Union. Abela served as president of the Malta Football Association from 1982-1992, and as Deputy Leader for Party Affairs of the Malta Labor Party from 1992-1998. In March 2008, after the resignation of former opposition leader Alfred Sant following Labor's narrow defeat in the general election, Abela contested for the Party's leadership and lost in a narrow defeat to the much younger Joseph Muscat. Proud of his working-class origins, Abela will turn 61 on April 22. He and his wife Margaret have two adult children.

¶3. (SBU) Abela's appointment made history in Malta, marking the first time a PM from the party in power has appointed a President from the opposition. While approval by Parliament was eventually unanimous (though some critics absented themselves from the vote), it was initially controversial. Some Nationalists were unhappy that an important plum had gone to the opposition, and even Labor supporters were less than enthusiastic, either because they were Abela supporters who didn't want their candidate neutralized and removed from the game, or because they were Abela detractors who perhaps didn't feel he deserved such an honor.

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